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ABSTRACT

This paper comments on the Carnegie Commission reports on higher education and discusses some of the issues higher education and the public have to face. Higher education is in a crisis and in desperate need of continuing financial support from the federal government. The Carnegie Commission can help the public understand some of the problems by pointing out that higher education is not a commodity, and that the chief beneficiary is not only the person who gets the degree, but society as well. The Commission has recently made proposals for a 3-year baccalaureate, for credit for outside experience, and for other types of extramural education. The case for 4-year residential colleges may be weak and, if so, they may have to disappear, for it is not the particular forms of higher learning that have to be preserved. Higher learning is a process of human growth and change, and the students of the sixties and seventies became aware, perhaps for the first time, of the humanity of all men and the need to connect education with a wider view of humanity. The Commission can also help in letting the public know what is happening that is good and important on campus today, and help inspire a public confidence without which the funding of higher education becomes progressively impossible. (AF)

Opening General Session
Sunday Evening, March 11

HIGHER EDUCATION IS NOT A COMMODITY*

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It may be foolhardy to ask a university president in these days to comment on the state of higher education. Most of his response will add up to one strangled cry, "Help!"

Evidence that the administration in Washington does not understand how the strength of institutions of higher learning is being eroded is useful in one way that I can see. It reminds us that colleges and universities will not be saved by gobs of money from the federal budget. A continuing federal support we must indeed have. It will need to be accompanied by comparable efforts on the part of each state, each locality, and each private sector, both corporate and individual.

It is depressing, to be sure, that the President's message on higher education last fall and again this year has rested its case upon financial aid to the student. Little is offered for the colleges except a prospect of research studies from a National Educational Foundation. As a recent NEW YORK TIMES editorial observes, that is like offering a drowning man "research on improved swimming techniques."

It is safe to presume that Richard Nixon while a student at Whittier College, Robert Finch while at Occidental, and Elliot Richardson while at Harvard heard not once but often that education was costing their colleges more than it was costing them. We may presume also that this message was in their alumni letters in years following, as alumni letters have read from time immemorial. We are told, however, that the administration was surprised when the higher education community reacted negatively to the September message.

The series of lucid reports which have come from the Carnegie Commission under Clark Kerr's direction have helped us better understand why we are in such trouble. The latest report, Less Time, More Options, proposes alternative methods for dispensing higher education so that it may be gained more quickly, more flexibly, more non-residentially by learners of all ages and all life stations.

Yet financial matters are at such a point that we who labor in higher education cannot refrain from feeling that the Carnegie Commission, to quote an old phrase from W. H. Auden, lectures upon navigation while the ship is going down.

It is not the Commission's fault. In the four years since it was organized, a national situation already serious has grown into a crisis. The fact that we

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have crises also in the cost of medical care, in the insolvency of city governments, in the overburdening of social services, and in the plight of certain transportation industries points to something out of kilter in the national economy. That subject is beyond us this evening, let alone beyond my own brief comments upon the Carnegie Commission's splendid work. It might be noted in passing, meanwhile, that the banks are full of money that citizens last year raised personal savings from 6 to 7%; and that creature comforts continue to increase. As a local item one could point to the explosion of sales this winter in snowmobiles, which average, I believe, about \$900. Still the taxpayers are in revolt about the cost of public services; and higher education at the moment hangs literally in the balance.

My own position, which I warned at the outset is a bad one for a spokesman on the subject, forces me to say that we simply must have the focus of public attention on our financial crisis. The Carnegie Commission was not charged to make a crisis report. Others are being issued from several sources.

Meanwhile, there are, I believe, things that the Carnegie Commission could do to help the public understand the crisis. With its national prominence it could help direct the nation's attention to a basic error in thinking about college education. This is the same error which was implicit in the President's message of last September.

The error in the public thinking is that college education is a commodity. Extending the error is the belief that college education is a commodity which a person by various means purchases for his own benefit, like a suit of clothes, or a book on how to win friends and influence people, or a set of weights to increase his biceps and chest capacity.

Higher education is not a commodity. The chief beneficiary of higher education is not the person who gains its credits and degrees. Higher education is a series of experiences which, if successful, create changes. These changes enable a human being to be of greater value to society. Society in turn depends upon positive human changes happening if it is to survive. The beneficiary is society itself.

The individual benefits too, of course. But what he becomes capable of doing as a result of his education benefits society well beyond himself. To prove this it is not necessary to point to a Charles Hall who in a laboratory at Oberlin College in the 1880's discovered the electrolytic process of producing aluminum. Thomas Edison, after all, never went to college. No, the social benefits we derive from higher education are more broadly diffused than that. Brought together, they can make the difference between an enlightened society of men and women and a mass of humanoids who will either stay at dead-level or who will fall back into varying stages of retrogression.

When economic times are bad, or should we say recessed, the commodity view of higher education increases. A clear fallacy in the commodity theory of college exists today in the unemployment among our most highly educated including over 50,000 Ph.D.'s, yet the economic subtleties involved are not well understood.

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When students demonstrate, the commodity view of the public toward education becomes a club wielded with zeal by old grads, hard hats, legislators, and here and there a state governor. The thought that young people should behave so badly after all that charity and taxes have given toward their education brings many people, including some who have gone to college, to the point of fury. Few administrators would be rash enough to suggest that students now and then might be demonstrating for a long-range benefit to society which has not yet reached its time. (Unhappily, the manner in which some of them demonstrate too often tips the balance into disruption.)

Higher education as social benefit above individual benefit had its day following the Soviet Sputnik in October, 1957. All at once the public realized that the university does have something to do with national well-being. A period ensued characterized by public claims such as that we should "start rocketry in kindergarten." The social benefit attached to college education I fear was mainly identified with the production of celestial hardware. Then in July, 1969, the Americans got to the moon first; and thus the 12-year saga of educational excellence was declared successfully concluded.

The current Carnegie proposals for a three-year baccalaureate, for credit for outside experience, and for other types of extramural education are being widely studied. They will have large impact upon educational process in the next few years. With the critical financial state that colleges are in, we should be driven to explore such options even if they did not have a solid educational rationale behind them.

In a curious way, nevertheless, the new emphasis upon non-residential and career-centered methods of gaining a college degree could make college look even more like a commodity to the public. Not a few may become re-convinced that four campus years spent roaming from dormitory to classroom to library to student union to gymnasium does indeed represent a waste of expensive time: "See, you can get it all by smart living and reading a book now and then."

If we plunge into short courses, three-year degrees, credit for outside experience, and all the rest, will there be a remaining case at all for residential four-year baccalaureate education? Perhaps the case cannot be made. If so, it is time after three centuries that we admitted it.

There will be nagging persistence among some of us that college education once again is not a commodity that can be wrapped up in various sizes and dispensed over the counter according to the customer's taste. The trouble is, we never have discovered how to determine when a person can be said to have become college-educated. We don't know the inside ingredients or the mental processes that go into it. Nor do we know how to distinguish a college-educated person in the best liberated sense from a person who has gone through the same four years, passed his courses and exams and received his diploma, and who may thereafter live his life as a narrow, self-serving soul incapable ever again of absorbing a new thought.

Perhaps the case for residential college cannot be made. We might be facing the era of its passing. Economic indices alone have all but written the epitaph for its headstone. If so, let us make the obsequies brief, lower

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the coffin quickly, and turn to other forms of dispensing higher learning.

For it is not the particular forms of higher learning we should be fighting to preserve. What needs most to be said is that higher learning, yet once again, is not a commodity. Higher learning is a process of human growth and change. It can happen through self-teaching or through contact with broadening experience; or it can happen best when campus conditions under fine professors are brought together in deliberate ways so that time, steady influence, and freedom from distraction can all work to produce the growth-changes in people which our future society must have if it is to survive.

I spoke briefly of the era of the '60's when we were pursuing excellence by shooting at the moon. Something else happened during that decade. It was a turbulent, anxious time as it still is today. Yet in that decade there grew on many a campus for the first time perhaps the base of a widespread belief in the humanity of all men: rich and poor, black and white, man and woman, American and Asian, educated and uneducated.

Students have pressed this credo upon their elders. They accuse the elders of refusing to practice humanity in national policy or even in the educational processes on the campus itself. Younger professors, some of whom started the decade as undergraduates, have joined the new priesthood of believers. Young doctors and young lawyers are turning from more lucrative aspects of their trade to do service in needy places. Such idealism is hard for some to keep at a time when we have been incapable of removing ourselves from a brutal and futile war overseas. Still it has come out of this past decade.

If we can maintain the humane spirit and at the same time retain substance and process in higher learning, then I believe the campuses might still lead the way to an era finer than any we have seen. There is on American campuses a current desire to connect education with a wider view of humanity. Some of its implications are disturbing; some of its protagonists appear intolerant and at times irrational. Anti-intellectualism on campus is always a paradox. Demonology and animalism as reactions to academe are so grotesque as to be hard to believe.

Yet good things are happening also. They carry an importance for higher education as growth rather than as commodity. The current press toward environmental studies is a student growth reaction that is typically promising. The mass reception of Lord Clark's magnificent film series, "Civilisation," is another.

If we could have a Carnegie report which makes clear, not just to educators but to the public, what is happening that is good and important on campus today, it might help inspire a public confidence without which the funding of higher education becomes progressively impossible. Some of the Commission reports have presented elements of this: contributions by Howard Bowen, Harold Hodgkinson, Kenneth Kenniston. We need a summation, I believe, that can speak for the higher learning in ways that our misunderstanding public, increasingly our antagonistic public, can hear and perhaps heed.

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Few thinking persons could disagree with Clark Kerr that higher education is not granted a manifest destiny. Probably we never had it. What we had were the traditions of the select few. The select few brought along the heritage of knowledge and culture. In this, America's first three hundred years, or at least the first 250, were not greatly different from Periclean Athens or Florence of the Medicis. The Land Grant College, to be sure, was a different thrust. Still it remained for decades under the influence of an economy of scarcity in higher education.

Now we have embarked upon an adventure to bring higher learning to the many. We are finding--and why should it surprise anyone--that it is costly to do this. The public is balking at paying the price. Still, other elements of society are asking that the price be paid. It is less costly, they say, than continual war overseas or revolution at home between the haves and have-nots. Of course, it will be up to higher education to make those inferences valid.

It is worth our effort to seek more effective ways and more efficient ways of bringing higher education to the many. Meanwhile, we must keep working to persuade the public that a full investment in higher learning for the many will be the best investment we ever made. If the investment does not return to ourselves, then it will to our great-grandchildren. Let us end on the hope that we may be fortunate enough to have them.